

The Story of Peter Wessels

VAN NIERKERK TELLS THE STORY OF HIS GREAT GRANDFATHER

It was about twelve years ago that I stood on the streets of Capetown. I had one afternoon of time on my hands before I would board the ship that would bring me to the United States of America. And I thought, What would be appropriate to do for that last afternoon? Should I take pictures for the last time? Should I take a tour of Capetown which I knew quite well? Or perhaps, should I rent a car and for the last time go around Cape Point with its beautiful, magnificent scenery? And then a thought struck me. I decided to take a bus to a certain spot on the slope of Table Mountain. There I got off the bus and walked a few yards into what we called "the feldt," or just a piece of land that was unoccupied. As I stood there amidst the ruins of a building, tall grass, and tall trees the following quotation from Ellen G. White came to mind. And it said this, **"Upon this land there will never again be another building. Only the wind will rustle the grass and blow through the tall trees as a mute testimony to what might have been."**

But let me start right from the beginning. It was before the turn of the century that my great-grandfather, Peter Wessels—many of you heard about him and read about him in your Bible books. Peter Wessels started reading his Bible and he became convinced that the seventh-day Sabbath was the right day on which to worship. **And so after studying diligently for several more weeks he finally decided that he was going to keep the seventh-day as the Sabbath, in spite of what his friends or his neighbors might think.** So he pulled the family together one evening at worship. (It was their custom to have worship together every evening after supper.)

And he told them that when he left this Christian reformed—this Dutch Reformed—Church, which is almost a state church in South Africa, many of his friends and neighbors came to him and said, "You are crazy. What has gotten into you? You know that you cannot do this!" And he determined to keep on. And so he talked to one of his neighbors by the name of Henry van Druden. And the two families together kept the Sabbath. **And for many months they thought they were the only people in the whole world keeping the seventh-day Saturday Sabbath.**

One day Grandpa thought, "I will go to visit my very good friend, Dr. Andrew Murray." Dr. Murray, at that time, was the leading theologian in the country of South Africa. So one Friday evening Grandpa got in

his buggy, drove it over to the Andrew Murray's home in Wellington, about 30 miles from his home; and there the two started chatting. They were old friends. They had known each other for years. And they started discussing the newfound faith that Grandpa had found. They talked through the night.

And, as the sun came up the next morning, it found the two of them walking down the little path with rose trees on each side; and, as they reached the garden gate, Dr. Murray turned to Great-grandpa and he said, "John, you have found the truth. Because of my position in the Dutch Reformed Church, I cannot make a stand at this point. But, if you feel that this is what you have to do, then do it, because you are right." And so more determined than ever, in spite of what his friends and even relatives were saying, he went back home and started anew to study the Bible and to keep the Sabbath.

And then something happened. There was a discovery of diamonds in the country; and very close to one of the ranches that Great-grandpa owned was this one field of diamonds that they had discovered. And he decided that it was about time for one of those periodic trips, to go and see how things were going on the ranches and then also at the same time to stop off and see what was going on at the diamond diggings. He took a train from Capetown up north to ___ [unintelligible]; and there he got off, visited three ranches, and then went over on a Thursday to the diamond fields. There he looked at how people were prospecting, and how they were staking claims, and how they were furiously, frantically digging, trying to become wealthier that night. And he was wondering about this, because he was a wealthy man already.

And so he thought, "Well I'll stay a little longer." And he became intrigued with what was going on in these diamond fields. Pretty soon he realized it was Friday evening. He decided to stay over the Sabbath. And there as his custom was on the Sabbath day, he took out his Bible.

That morning, in the sun next to the tent where he was staying on the diamond diggings, he sat down and started reading his Bible. Pretty soon he noticed something very strange about three tents over. **Instead of feverishly digging and staking claims, trying to become wealthy like everyone else, there too was another gentleman, sitting, reading his Bible.**

And he went over to the gentleman and he said, "Good morning, Sir" (in an African dialect). The gentleman said, "Do you speak English?" He said, "Yes I do." [Grandpa:] "What are you doing?" And he said, "Well, I'm reading my Bible." [Grandpa] He said, "Isn't that a

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little strange that you are reading your Bible while everybody else is trying to stake claims to find wealth?" **And the gentleman said, "This is my Sabbath. I'm a Seventh-day Adventist." And Great-grandfather looked at him and said, "You're a what?"** And he said, "I'm a Seventh-day Adventist."

And so the two of them started talking, and Grandfather found out that his name was John Hunt. And that he had been baptized in California by a little outgrowth. And that there was a company of people that called themselves Seventh-day Adventists, and that James White had just been elected the first president of the just newly established General Conference. [Apparently the year was 1863.] The [California] headquarters was at Oakland California.

How thrilled Great-grandpa was! All this time he felt that they were alone in the world; and here he found a man who represented a company of people across the ocean, who believed just as he did. He wrote and sent a letter with this man, who incidentally was at the diamond fields to try to tell people about Christ. He sent a letter back with him eventually to the United States with a check in it. And it said, "Please send us a missionary."

Finally a letter came back, not from James White but from Ellen White stating, "We do not have enough funds. Your letter does not cover enough funds and we do not even have the personnel. We are a young organization." But, undaunted, he wrote back and included another check and said, "Send us a missionary." And, after several months of negotiations, finally a letter came back telling them what day a certain ship would be sailing for Capetown, South Africa. On board would be a missionary family. How they waited for that ship to come. Finally the day arrived and the whole family was out at the docks, waiting for the missionaries to come. They finally disembarked. They stayed with their family for about a week.

During that week Grandpa went to the governor of the cape, Sir George Gray; and he said, "Look, I want you to help me to find some land, because these missionaries want to go up north and establish a mission station." Grandpa offered to pay them for whatever land they would give; but, not telling Grandpa anything, Sir George Gray went into his office, wrote a letter, sealed it, and handed it to him. **He said, "When you get up north, go to the governor of Rhodesia, give this to Cecil John Rhodes."**

And so they trekked for four months. They trekked by ox wagon. Two of their company died on the way. Finally they reached the north country. And there they found the governor of Rhodesia. Great-grandpa handed him the letter.

He opened the letter, read it, and he looked at Great-grandpa and said, "How much land do you want?" **And he said, "Well, maybe 800 to 1,000 acres would be very good." "Well, I'll do you one better," he said. "I've been told in this letter by Sir George Gray to**

give you all the land you want. I'll tell you what. You take a horse; and you ride that horse, once you've found the place you want to settle, one hour in each direction of the compass. And the land that you've covered you can have."

And so he took a horse—the freshest he could find, the fastest that he could find, not one that you had to say Amen to—and he rode one hour north, one hour east, one hour south, and one hour west. And, with the horse frothing at the mouth from exhaustion, he finally arrived at the point of origin.

They had covered a little more than 4,000 acres. And today we have Solusi mission station on that piece of property. And from that slow beginning the work started. And as I mentioned before, Grandpa was a man of quite a bit of means. He would be considered a millionaire in today's terms.

And he decided that he wanted to do something special, something out of his own pocket. So he said, I have heard about the medical work. The climate here at the cape is such that it could be a marvelous place for a sanitarium. **So out of his own pocket, he built a sanitarium—a beautiful place on the slopes of the mountain, just a little ways from his beautiful mansion, with many rooms.** He was called the Earl of Lansdom because he was so wealthy. When they furnished the home, he and his family, with Great-grandmother, went over to Europe and had special furniture made for the special rooms and had it shipped over.

And then a strange thing happened. Some of his wealthy friends came to him and said, "We would like to take some of our vacations at the sanitarium that you built. The sanitarium really has quite a reputation and we want to be close by. But you know we drink a little, and we puff a little, and, ah, we like to play cards, and we certainly don't want to give up those things when we come and visit your sanitarium. Would you consider building a few rooms? We'll pay for them; but build a few rooms where we can have a smoking room, and where we can serve a little ale, and then also a place where we can play our cards undisturbed." And Grandpa thought about that for a little while. He decided maybe not to do it. But they prevailed on him; and finally he thought, "Well, it shouldn't do any harm because they won't be mixing with the other patients." And he allowed them to do it.

One week later—remember it took at least three to four weeks for a letter to arrive from America—but one week after he made the decision, a letter arrived from Ellen G. White, telling him that she had been shown in a vision that he was not using his finances and his influence correctly. The second letter came, the third one came, the fourth one came; and, after the fourth one, he became quite perturbed. And he said, What does this little lady over in America know about my business anyway? It's my money and I'll do with it as I please. And so he did.

Something strange began to happen, where he

had a monopoly of all the feed stores—supplying the farmers with their supplies, their grain, their implements, their fertilizer. One by one, he started losing these stores. He couldn't figure out why. One day he went up north to sell one of the ranches, because he needed to cover some debts. And while he was there, he received a telegram from his brother who was the business manager of the sanitarium. The telegram was very short, but very succinct. And it said, "Sanitarium burned down, come home immediately." He took the first train that he could find. It took him two days to travel 800 miles.

He finally pulled into the Capetown station and was met by his brother Henry. There he told Henry, "It's too bad that the sanitarium burned down; but I'm sure glad that we have insurance and we'll recoup our financial losses." And Henry hung his head and he said, "I meant to tell you this before; but I tried to economize because of the bad turn that some of our businesses have taken and I did not renew the insurance. There is quite a bit of money owing on the new expansion of the sanitarium."

He had lost most of his businesses. He had two stores left. And he had kept his favorite ranch, the one on which he had always said he would go and retire. It was called "Beaufontaine," meaning beautiful fountain. And he decided the only way out to cover his debts, because those people who were his friends before were at him to get their money. And he went up north and he sold "Beaufontaine."

Brothers and Sisters, **twenty-eight days after he sold that piece of property they discovered on that ranch the richest diamond mine this world has ever known by the name of Kimberly.** Twenty-eight days! He went back to Capetown literally a broken man. All his friends had forsaken him except old Henry van Druden. And where he had this beautiful mansion with its gorgeous furniture on the side of the hill, the creditors came and even took that.

Under South African law, at the time there were only three things that he could keep: kitchen or dining room furniture, a sewing machine (if they had one), and bedroom furniture. **And up to this time, the letters kept coming from Ellen G. White. Sixty-nine letters of which sixty-four were unopened.**

And the day that he had to move out onto the outskirts of town where the poorest of the poor people lived, he found a little two-room shack. Henry van Druden brought an ox cart with two oxen. They took out the bedroom furniture, an old sewing machine, and the dining room furniture.

And, as they turned the hutch in the dining room on its side to get it out the door, sixty-nine letters fell from its top shelf. Grandpa took those letters; he put them in his overcoat pockets. Because it was a cold winter evening and he was a despondent, broken man, he went to the outskirts of town where the poor people lived. By candlelight that evening he took out those

letters, all written by Ellen G. White; only the first four or five opened. They had postmarks on them from San Francisco; Seattle, Washington; New York; Boston; Frankfurt, Germany; Sidney, Australia; Oslo, Norway.

He arranged these in the chronological order of their postmarks. And he started to read them. And in these letters he read his whole life story. They're on file at the vault at Andrews University and my family still has a few of the originals. Some of them, a few of them, have been published. But he read his life story. **How Ellen White had predicted that the sanitarium would burn to the ground. And she predicted that three fire departments would come to the rescue; but that there would be nothing that they could do. And that is the way it happened.** Three fire departments came and nothing that they tried could stop that ravenous fire.

And so when I visited it twelve years ago, when I left South Africa, her quote came to mind. That never, as long as time shall last, will there ever be a building on that site. The ruins and the wind going through the trees and the grass would be a mute testimony to what might have been.

What might have been! That is not all she told him in those letters. She reminded him of his wealth; and then she made two significant statements. The one that if he had used his influence and his finances correctly, that the Great Boer War in South Africa never would have been. Do you know what that means? That means that thousands of lives would never have been lost.

And then she made the most significant statement that I have ever heard. And she said, "John, if you had used your influence and your means, which God entrusted to you, correctly, the government of South Africa would be well-disposed to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and message."

And do you know what that means? That very well means that the government of South Africa may have been a Seventh-day Adventist government. And you know that country is in the news a lot today. There is hatred between blacks and whites. And if at home there were people well-disposed to the Seventh-day Adventist message, just think how the course of history could have been different today!

And he read the remainder of those letters, telling him so many things, some of them about incidents at the sanitarium that he thought no one knew of: the special favors to some of the doctors, the special favors to some of the patients, his lack of giving money for the educational work.

And he vowed, as he read the last letter (just about sunrise the next morning), that if the Lord would give him another chance that he would do his best to live up to the counsel of the Spirit of Prophecy.

And he prayed for many months. And finally he was convicted to start up his feed business again. He

started with a small little store. Again the Lord blessed him. Pretty soon he had a big business going. And pretty soon he developed that business and purchased more property.

And again the Lord blessed; because, not only was there a diamond rush in South Africa but, there was also a gold rush. **And on this one property they discovered gold.** And today the family is still operating the mine called the Wesselton Gold Mine. And much of the funds being generated from that mine have gone into the work; but never again would the Lord give him the equivalent of his first opportunity.

Would you like to know how much money had been taken out of the Diveners Consolidated Mine at Kimberly? In today's money, eighteen and a half billion dollars. Could you begin to understand what that would have meant for the Lord's work?

But he decided to do the best with what he had. He sent one son, my Mom's father, over to Battle Creek to study. And while there he wrote home and he said, "We're building a church here. I'd like for you to help." So Grandpa wrote a check for ten thousand pounds and said, "Here, use it for the church." And Grandma in her own way, she wrote a check for ten thousand pounds and said, "Here, install an organ." And so the first pipe organ in the denomination was installed at Battle Creek in the old tabernacle.

There's another sidelight too that's quite interesting. Old Dr. Kellogg wanted to start his Kellogg business; and some of the funds that were used to start that was a loan actually from Great-grandpa to him.

But he and Great-grandma felt that there was more they could do. And they discussed their finances; they felt that they wanted to make another gift. And just the week before, they had heard that Mrs. White was traveling to Australia, and that she would be there for at least three or four months. **And so they decided to write a check for a certain amount and to mail it to Australia.**

Now you have to stay with me because it becomes a little complicated. It took twenty-six days, minimum for a letter to arrive from South Africa, by ship, to Australia. And here, Mrs. White was in Australia, working with the brethren, planning to establish a school.

And in a vision (and you can read the vision; it's written down), **she saw a clearing of land with trees on one side and trees on the other and a six-foot long furrow, six inches wide and six inches deep, without a trace of horses or oxen, tractors** (which they didn't have then), or any implements of any kind. No trace, just this furrow. And, in the vision, the Lord told her that this would be the place to establish the school.

So the next morning, Tuesday morning, as they were leaving to go and hunt for a piece of property, they

picked her up with a buggy and started off in a certain direction. And she said, "Where are you going?" They said, "We are heading out toward the place where we think we should look for the property." She said, "**No, turn around, go this way.**" They said, "**No, you can't do that. The property out that way is so bad.**" In those days they called it "sour soil." They said, "You cannot establish a school there. Our school must be established where you can have agriculture." And they argued with her. And she said, "We've got to go in this direction."

And after driving most of the day, they were hot and tired and hungry; **and as they were rounding the bend in a dusty little road she said, "STOP."** There they helped her off the buggy and she walked into a clearing. **And they found a six foot long furrow, six inches wide and six inches deep, without a trace of human hands or implements.** And she told them, "This is the property we're going to buy. Find out who owns it." **They threw their hands up in despair. They said, "Number one, we don't have the money. Number two, this is a rotten part of the country." And she said, "Let's just follow those instructions."**

And to prove her wrong, they took some of the samples of the soil. And they took them very quietly that evening to the University, the college at that time, which is today the University of Sidney, Australia campus; and they gave it to the agricultural experts and said, "Test this soil for us." The next morning, when the conference office opened, there was a gentleman sitting in front of the office waiting for them. He said, "**Where did you get this soil? I don't know of any soil around here that is so rich and so good.**" And what they found was that there was a pocket of land, surrounded by this rotten, sour soil. One hurdle was crossed.

The biggest hurdle was the money. And they kept asking her, "Where are we going to get the money?" But she knew her Bible well; and she said, "The Lord will provide." Wednesday came. Thursday, Friday morning; still no money. And the owners of the property had given them only until Friday to come up with the money. They were desperate and very despondent. The mood at the conference office, we are told, was very gloomy that day.

And in the mid-morning mail came a letter with a postmark on it from Capetown, South Africa. Remember it was mailed at least twenty-six days before. And, as they opened that letter, they found in it a check in Great-grandmother's handwriting, made out to a bank in Australia. It was a cashier's check, for the exact amount of money that they needed to buy Avondale College.

[Thank God for the Spirit of Prophecy!]